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The Editor's Notebook

What Happened?

One of the more puzzling aspects of the war in Viet Nam is the obvious ambivalence about it in usually well-informed circles.

Few support the United States policy there without pained reservations. Many of those who endorse President Johnson's present definition of purpose and commitment of power in the Southeast Asia campaign do so with reluctance bordering upon sadness. It troubles me that this should be so.

Well, my eyes and mind were opened recently by an 80-page booklet from the Center for the Study of Democratic Institutions at Santa Barbara, Cal. It is entitled, "How the United States Got Involved in Viet Nam." It was written by Robert Scheer and is described as the "first full exploration" of America's "slow, gradual and then steadily mounting involvement in Viet Nam . . ."

THE ESSENCE of Mr. Scheer's report, which starts with the abdication of the emperor, Bao Dai, in favor of the Viet Minh in August, 1945, is this:

First the French and then the United States have tried for two decades to withhold from the nationalist, independence movement in Viet Nam what it considers to be its rightful patrimony: the local, political control of old Indochina.

The French fought against the independence forces for almost 10 years, after having ruled Indochina without challenge for 70. Having suffered excruciating losses in a war against the Viet Minh that was costly and unpopular with the French people, France's colonial army was overcome and she was forced to sign the Geneva Accords of 1954.

From that date forward, the United

States moved in to apply its anti-Communist policy for Asia. That policy, enunciated by John Foster Dulles, and implemented by the work of the Central Intelligence Agency in South Viet Nam, was heavily influenced by a strong and effective "lobby" in this country.

The first spearhead of that lobby and the instrumentality of U. S. policy was Ngo Dinh Diem, a Catholic, who had been part of the French colonial government.

DIEM WAS LIONIZED by liberals, intellectuals, politicians and by high officials of the Catholic Church in this country. He was believed to be the anti-Communists' best hope for a stable, free and democratic state in Viet Nam. He was NOT the people's choice in non-Catholic South Viet Nam. But he became "our man in Saigon," the agent through whom we expected to achieve the miracle of an anti-Communist enclave in a nation that had been liberated from French colonial rule by the Communist-led Viet Minh.

The money, contrivances and devices employed by the United States through the CIA, including administrative "counsel" to Diem through a "cover" team from Michigan State University, failed to save Diem from the gross errors of his regime. The miracle collapsed.

Diem's early champions and admirers became disenchanted and dismayed over the nepotism, aloofness and brutality of his government. The Viet Minh who remained in the South, after the exchange of peoples between South and North following the Geneva Accords, continued to hold widespread popular support as conquerors of the French. The July, 1956, elec-

tions for the reunification of Viet Nam, agreed to by the Viet Minh and the French after the fall of Dien Bien Phu, had been cancelled by Diem on the sure knowledge that the Viet Minh (Communists and subsequently the Viet Cong) would win overwhelmingly. By the early 60's the Viet Cong were on a winning rampage.

Well, in the face of a swiftly deteriorating anti-Communist position in South Viet Nam, the Diem government was deposed, and Diem himself killed. The first of a long series of "governments," which were hardly more than juntas, assumed control.

BY THIS TIME the United States was deeply involved militarily. Between 1950 and 1954 the United States had sent \$2.6 billion worth of military and economic aid to the French in Viet Nam. From 1955 to 1962 the Vietnamese received another \$2 billion in aid, three quarters of which was for economic assistance.

Our stake in South Viet Nam involved not only enormous injections of money, personnel and equipment but the commitment of rising numbers of "advisers" whose presence heavily mortgaged American prestige throughout Asia and the Pacific area.

What started as an effort to plant a "little bit of America" in the ideological jungle of Viet Nam, a living barrier to Communist aggression and challenge to "wars of liberation," has now become a dangerous war in the midst of a civil war. And our role may well be on the unpopular side among the masses of Vietnamese whose distaste for Communism may indeed be secondary to their distrust of the foreign white man.